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# FACTSHEET: Effective and inclusive crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons learnt

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## Introduction

The COVINFORM project examines the COVID-19 responses at government, public health, community, and information and communication levels. It analyses the impact of the pandemic with a special focus on how different stakeholders acknowledged and addressed vulnerability. It draws upon complex adaptive system and intersectional approaches to offer a multilevel and interdisciplinary critique of COVID-19 responses. Additionally, it relies on residents' perspectives, and how these responses may exacerbate vulnerability and marginalisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a range of responses in different countries, reflecting their unique contexts, governance structures and societal dynamics. The responses reveal successful strategies, lessons learned, as well as challenges and adaptations that emerged over time. COVINFORM compared and synthesised the COVID-19 crisis communication responses in ten countries: Austria, Belgium, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Wales, investigating the planning, implementation, and adaptation of COVID-19 responses across diverse local contexts and groups.

Within the field of crisis communication, the pandemic posed numerous challenges to governments, public health authorities and media communicators. Effective communication of measures, risks and solutions during an ongoing and evolving crisis proved complex, multi-faceted and difficult. Government and other public authority communicators, key journalists and media experts adopted different strategies aiming at providing clear information to help citizens understand the situation, accept and adopt the measures being taken, and follow plans for social isolation, quarantine, testing, treatment and, later, vaccination. However, the

temporal dimension of the pandemic, the overlapping of multiple crises and the different approaches taken by countries further complicated the effectiveness of crisis communication. Thus, the different styles of communication management and communication principles that were analysed across the ten countries offer a variety of lessons on how to achieve effective crisis communication.

The second aspect addressed here is the recognition of vulnerability and the inclusiveness of crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most countries were initially unprepared for tailored and multi-level crisis communication and adopted a one-size-fits-all mainstream communication approach (see D7.8). Vulnerabilities in crisis communication were gradually recognised and changed over time. It was recognized that vulnerability is a flexible category that gets activated in different ways and scales over time and depending on the context. While vulnerability was initially defined primarily in terms of physical health, the focus gradually broadened to include factors such as mental health, age, homelessness, digital access, language skills (deaf, blind, simple language) and non-native speakers, as well as people with migrant background.

Below we present the main lessons learned in the field of crisis communication planning, crisis management principles, plus acknowledgement and addressing of vulnerability, based on the analysis of the ten countries. This analysis is based on secondary sources, expert interviews, and interviews with residents in each of the ten countries, analysed in a series of deliverables for WP7. An in-depth analysis of each country and a synthesis of the findings can be found in the published deliverables.

# LESSONS LEARNT



## CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

- Detailed plan on communication strategies and channels should be included in crisis plans.
- Plans should allow for flexibility and adaptation for different types of crisis and durations.
- Guidelines for coherent crisis communication should be included in the plans
- Clear distribution of responsibilities and tasks within the communication plans.

## COLLABORATION & RESPONSIBILITY

- Centralized approach to guarantee consistency and coherence on a national level.
- Designated communicators to deliver key messages – avoid multiple voices.
- Task force should include experts from different fields: health experts, social scientists, communication experts, psychologists – to plan a comprehensive and multi-facetted communication strategy.
- Collaborations with the media, national and regional institutions, civil society organizations, and community centres to distribute further key messages.

## EVALUATION

- Crisis communication must be evaluated periodically and incorporate citizens' feedback.
- Communication efficiency should be evaluated and incorporated in future plans: analysis of current plans, identifying the gaps, and immediate incorporation of wider, more tailored, and more immediate reach, based on the lessons learned.

*"It would have been useful to have a far greater degree of interaction between citizens and community/government, aside from political conflicts."*

**Resident 8, Greece**

*"There was a lot of information. So I wasn't really reassured about the whole thing. It was just a lot of things going on, a lot of things had been said from policy government and everything. So we don't know which one is true, which one is a lie."*

**Resident 1, England**

*"Because a lot of the things that information we were getting was from the NHS or the government website. So, to just get that extra support from our local - I don't know - council or things like that, that would have been really great, because then we would know where to - if we had any issues, where to go to."*

**Resident 2, England**

*"What would I say to the government? Well, maybe they should not give so much information [...] which confuse people. [...] and so many advisors going on TV to give the daily report, which seemed like the war report every day. [...] And in the end people have become saturated and distrustful."*

**Resident 6, Spain**

# COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES



## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Information must be disseminated immediately.
- Multiple communication channels should be used from the onset.
- Information should be clear, straightforward, and simple.
- Uncertainty should be acknowledged, not covered up.
- Information overload should be avoided.
- Experts on the respective crisis must be included in the information dissemination process as key communicators.

## MISINFORMATION

- All of the aforementioned points combat the spread of misinformation.
- Emphasis on an honest communication in order to maintain the public's trust.
- Information must be backed by experts.

*“For the future if they say one thing, let it be that. Not to say 1000 different things, because one gets confused and, in the end, you don't know if the news is true. One no longer believes it because one thinks, today they say one thing, tomorrow another, so you don't do what you have to do.”*

**Resident 3, Italy**

*“So many vaccines. Information is changing every now and then. How's that even going to reassure anyone to take it?”*

**Resident 6, Wales**

*“Collect all information on one page. Have the same information in several places. ... have it on one page, and like everyone else – municipalities – just point to the page via a link. So that everyone gets the same information.”*

**Resident 2, Sweden**

*“And then you didn't know what to expect. Because of course, one day they would say one thing and the next day they would say the opposite.”*

**Resident 6, Spain**

*“Experts are best, ... really trained experts who also present the whole thing with arguments and don't just say, yes, that's the fact, do what you want with it, but also argue.”*

**Resident 9, Germany**

*“Above all, honesty. I would wish for honesty. And if something really bad happens, that every household get an information sheet. I would like that, because then everyone would know, not just 2-3 people. ... I would wish, if something really bad was going on, that at least information leaflets were put in the letterboxes.”*

**Resident 2, Germany**

# INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION AND VULNERABLE GROUPS



## IDENTIFICATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

- Adopt a holistic understanding of vulnerability, with overlapping risks and needs.
- Identify vulnerabilities specific to the current crisis.
- Include detailed identification of vulnerable groups by type and specific needs in crisis communication plans.

## INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

- Tailored communication should be conducted immediately to reach as many groups as possible.
- Multiple communication channels should be used from the start to reach more groups, combining traditional and social media, community leaders, printed materials, press conferences etc.
- Information should be communicated in multiple languages, respective of each context: sign language, simple language.

## ACTIVATING SOLIDARITY

- Raising awareness of vulnerable groups and at-risk groups raises solidarity.
- Messages of solidarity are more effective, than threatening and disciplining messages.

*“I don't speak the language so well. So, it is difficult to watch the news. So, they should add extra subtitles in different languages or something. That would help. Or extra programs in different languages can also help.”*

**Resident 9, Belgium**

*“First, more clear communication from the government. Maybe also they could have reacted faster to the needs of the most vulnerable.”*

**Resident 12, Belgium**

*“Information should be inclusive and really reach everyone.”*

**Resident 1, Portugal**

*“I was not that skilled in language and sometimes, even if it's announced in ... this government.at, you are reading this and you are not sure what it says exactly ... just on the surface ... but I'm not sure how I should get into this ... because I don't read German so fluently and for me the only one opportunity is to ask someone, who knows the language to tell me what it says.”*

**Resident 1, Austria**

*“Just organize information sessions in an accessible way, for example. Also, in different languages with interpreters. For example, they give sessions about the measures and then also in different languages [...]”*

**Resident 12, Belgium**

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